

The case for a creative fashion policy in Bangladesh



MIND THE GAP
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Bangladesh is the friend who styles everyone else for the party but shows up wearing a borrowed fit. We are the world's second-largest clothing exporter. Our garments fill wardrobes from New York to Nairobi, and our factories operate around the clock to meet global demand. Yet, we remain barely present in the conversation on design, craft, and fashion identity. From the factory floors of Savar to the fashion capitals of the world, we manage to ship every label but our own.

It's an irony woven into our national fabric: our factories are masters of mass production, but our designers struggle. The issue isn't talent—Bangladesh is overflowing with creativity—it's that our system rewards volume rather than vision. The government has perfected the art of facilitating exports but failed spectacularly at nurturing the creators. And therein lies the problem: we continue to treat fashion as an optional industry instead of a part of our identity.

In Bangladesh, our signature styles (jamdani, muslin, nakshi kantha) are seldom part of contemporary fashion. At the heart of this disconnect lies an ecosystem that suppresses creativity. Local designers attempting to establish brands in Bangladesh are fighting a battle they did not choose. The first obstacle starts with the fabric. Our mills are designed for bulk orders—thousands of identical T-shirts for European chains—not for small-scale designers aiming to produce 50 unique, high-quality pieces. The required minimum order quantity is excessively high, and even if a designer manages to persuade a factory to accept a smaller order, the price per metre becomes prohibitively costly. Importing fabric isn't any easier; taxes and duties increase the cost of high-quality silk, chiffon, or lace to the point where the final product becomes unaffordable for local buyers. Designers are left with a bleak choice:



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compromise on quality or profit. Most end up doing both.

Then comes the challenge of production. The country's garment infrastructure—our economic backbone—is built for scale, not for creativity. Large factories have no incentive to collaborate with independent designers who produce limited quantities. Small workshops, on the other hand, lack quality control and technical expertise. Designers trying to meet professional standards often find themselves pleading for production slots squeezed between export deadlines. Add to this the ever-present threat of design theft—where collections are copied and sold as fast-fashion

In contrast, a Bangladeshi designer spends half their career just sourcing fabric and the other half justifying why their “Made in Bangladesh” tag doesn't mean factory-made.

Our middle class, though increasingly fashion-conscious, still associates prestige with imported clothing. A Pakistani designer lawn suit or an Indian saree is considered aspirational. A Bangladeshi one is deemed ordinary. This colonial hangover of taste makes it nearly impossible for local brands to charge what they're worth. Designers are constantly asked, “Why is it so expensive if it's made here?” As if local creativity should come at a discount. Until we break this mindset

that imported means superior, our designers will remain underappreciated.

However, the government cannot be excused. Policy has consistently ignored the creative economy. Every incentive, every subsidy, every rebate is designed around mass manufacturing and export metrics. The ready-made garment (RMG) industry benefits from tax breaks, bonded warehouses, and duty-free imports of machinery. Yet the same facilities are inaccessible to small design houses. Designers cannot import fabric without paying exorbitant duties. They cannot access export incentives unless they produce at a massive scale. They cannot even open showrooms abroad without navigating a maze of banking regulations and foreign exchange controls. We have built a bureaucracy that rewards repetition and punishes originality.

If Bangladesh truly wants to climb the global value chain, it must rethink its strategy. The government needs to stop acting like a compliance officer and start functioning like a cultural investor. That begins with policy—bold, clear, and unapologetically creative.

First, establish a national fashion and textile council. This should not be a ceremonial committee but a statutory body with real authority. Its mandate should include fashion promotion, craft revival, global market access, and representation of designers in trade policy. The council must be comprised of individuals who genuinely understand fashion—designers, artisans,

offering grants, low-interest loans, and export assistance to emerging designers. If we can subsidise shrimp farms, we can certainly invest in our cultural capital. The fund could cover participation in international fairs, support e-commerce infrastructure, and underwrite collaborations with global brands.

Third, solve the fabric crisis. Offer tax breaks to mills that produce small-batch, high-end textiles. Set up design-friendly industrial clusters where small labels can access shared production facilities—such as cutting, dyeing, and pattern-making—without the burden of massive capital investment. Reduce import duties on speciality fabrics and trims, ensuring fair access for small importers. It is absurd that a country exporting billions in garments cannot provide affordable fabric for its own designers.

Fourth, make heritage a strategy, not a museum caption. Jamdani already has geographical indication status; now, fund design residencies that pair weavers with contemporary designers, guarantee a minimum take for high-skill looms, and protect patterns with enforceable intellectual property (IP) rights so our motifs cannot be free clip art for someone else's runway.

Finally, invest in fashion education and innovation. Reform existing fashion universities and technical institutes by introducing global exchange programmes, residencies, and visiting faculty from established fashion capitals. Provide scholarships for designers to study abroad, with the requirement that they return to mentor others. Encourage research into sustainable fabrics and the revival of heritage textiles.

The outcome of these reforms would be more than just better fashion—it would be better nation branding. When a Bangladeshi label appears at an international platform, it changes how the world perceives “Made in Bangladesh.” It signals that we are not just a global factory, but a source of artistry, heritage, and innovation. And when our own citizens begin to wear those same labels with pride, it means something even greater—that we have finally learnt to value our own creativity. The threads of pride, culture, and creativity are already in our hands. All we need now is a government willing to stitch them together.

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and textile experts—not just exporters and bureaucrats.

Second, create a creative export fund—a government-backed financing scheme

Is our cinema finally speaking of women's quiet revolution?



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TASMIAH T RAHMAN

A few weeks ago, as I watched *Barir Naam Shahana* and *Saba* in a not-so-packed Dhaka cinema hall, I found myself reflecting deeply on the stories being told. Leesa Gazi's directorial *Barir Naam Shahana* follows the story of a woman who escapes an abusive marriage in 90's Bangladesh, wants to take control of her own life, defying social stigma and building her own path, while *Saba* centres on a young woman torn between her duties as a caregiver and her search for spiritual and personal freedom. During the intervals and while leaving the hall, I asked a few women sitting nearby whether they could relate to the stories on screen. Their answers were unanimous.

“Divorce is such a curse,” one young woman said quietly. “It's a bigger curse than the trauma from a husband's torture.”

At a different hall, an older woman added, “I wouldn't want my daughter to suffer like the girl in *Saba*. I would rather die.”

These reactions made me think: is mainstream cinema finally reflecting the quiet revolutions that women carry out in their daily lives? Are we now seeing women not just surviving but negotiating, claiming, and redefining their freedom?

A quiet revolution is indeed unfolding in the Bangladeshi cinematic landscape through the patient, intimate language of resilience. Films like *Rickshaw Girl*, *Made in Bangladesh*, *Barir Naam Shahana*, *Priyo Maloti*, and *Saba* portray women as workers, believers, caregivers, and artists—ordinary people navigating extraordinary pressures of life. Some survive and thrive, while others do not. Each story opens a different window: Naima, the rickshaw painter who disguises her gender to feed her family; Shimu, the garment worker who dares to unionise; Dipa who runs away from an abusive marriage to become a qualified physician;

A proposal to create 100 directly elected women's seats in parliament was rejected, replaced instead with 50 reserved seats and incremental quotas that will only reach 33 percent women by 2043. This represents an attempt at inclusion without bringing transformation. Women are visible and present in our society, but not empowered. Women's visibility is celebrated as long as it does not disturb established structures, whether in politics or on screen.

Maloti, who resists moral policing; and Saba, the sole caregiver of her mother. Their resistance is subtle but persistent. They endure, improvise, and make space for themselves in worlds that often deny them. British-Bangladeshi social economist Naila Kabir referred to this as “the art of survival within constraint.” Cinema, by depicting these small but powerful acts, makes visible the negotiations women perform every day.

A recent article titled “Politics of exclusion: Women's political rights and a revolution deferred,” published by this daily, highlighted the struggles women are facing in the current socio-political landscape, discussing the national conference of the Forum for Women's Political Rights (FWPR) and the limitations of the July Charter.

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Kabeer's book *Renegotiating Patriarchy: Gender, Agency and the Bangladesh Paradox* provides a useful lens to understand this phenomenon. Women in Bangladesh enter new spaces through work, education, and migration, but their advances often involve bargaining within existing patriarchal rules rather than overturning them. In politics, women gain reserved seats but rarely make decisions. In cinema, women occupy the frame but remain embedded in emotional labour and endurance. Visibility does not equal power. Patriarchy adapts, allowing limited freedoms while retaining control. The narrative, both onscreen and off, often ends in survival, rarely in revolution.

When Naima pedals through Dhaka, when Dipa rests after a day of hospital duties, and when women at the FWPR conference demand direct elections, they are negotiating power. Their labour—moral, emotional, or political—is crucial, yet undervalued. These negotiations are not failures; they are strategic acts within constraints, and every negotiation contains the seed of change. When Shimu speaks in a meeting, *Saba* questions purity, Dipa reclaims motherhood without marriage, or women at the FWPR demand direct elections—boundaries shift. These acts may seem small, but they redefine what is possible.

True transformation requires seeing women not merely as characters or voters, but as decision-makers, as political subjects with voice and agency. Empowerment is not granted through policy or representation; it is claimed through struggle. Our cinemas have started to portray that claim, and politics must follow.

As I was leaving the hall, one of the young women I had spoken to said, “At least now we can talk about it.” Perhaps that is where every revolution begins—in conversation, reflection, and in refusing silence. Until then, whether on screen or in everyday life, Bangladeshi women will continue quietly pushing, negotiating, and redefining what it means to survive, and to claim their power.

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